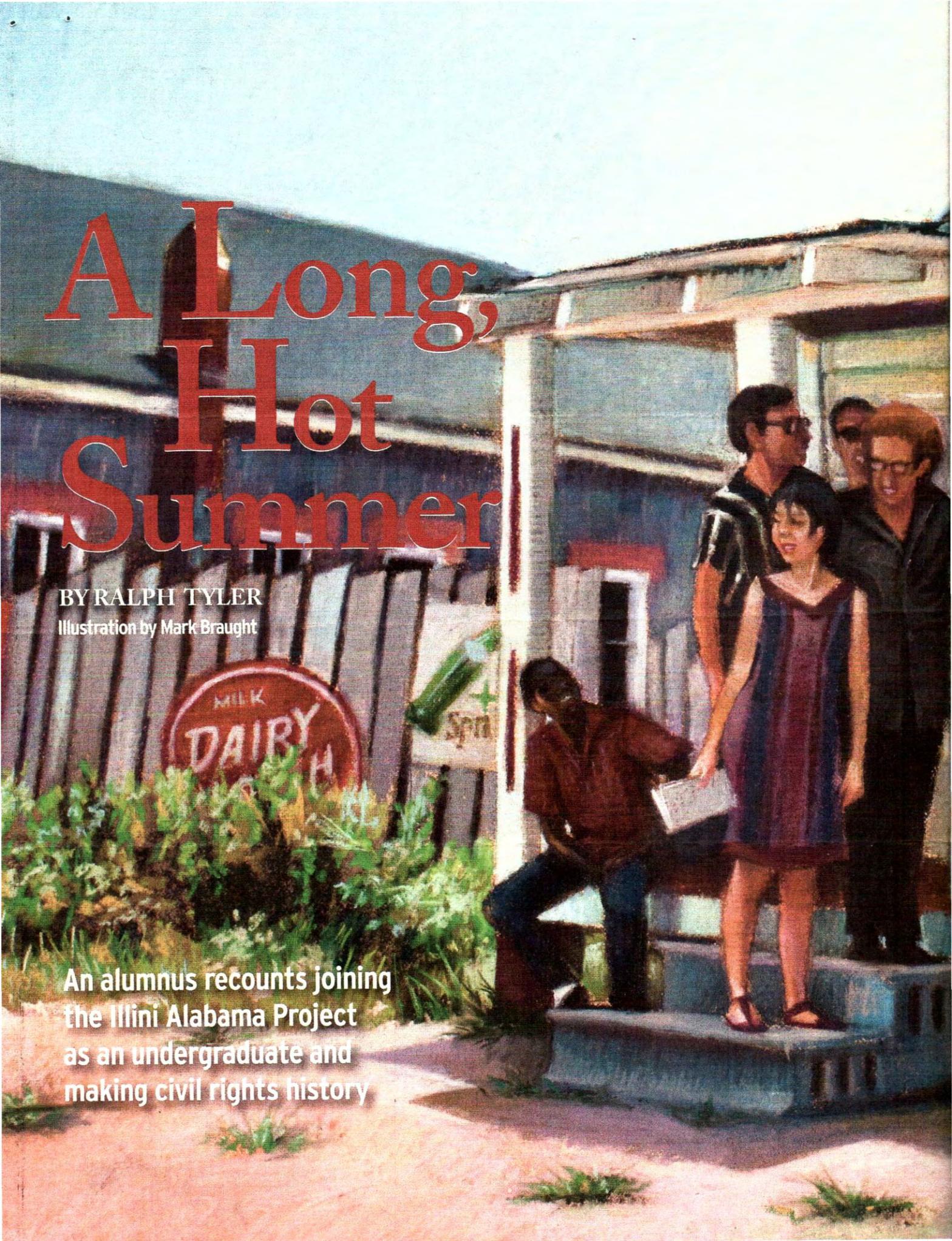


A Long, Hot Summer

BY RALPH TYLER

Illustration by Mark Braught

An alumnus recounts joining
the Illini Alabama Project
as an undergraduate and
making civil rights history



The South of the 1960s challenged justice workers from around the nation, including students with the Illini Alabama Project.



Photo courtesy of Ralph Tyler

The Illini Alabama Project of the mid-1960s brought UI students to Greene County, Ala., to help in the civil rights cause. Above, project member Ralph Tyler, center, gathers with African-American farmers to drive to Washington, D.C., as part of a case brought against the U.S. Department of Agriculture to eliminate racial discrimination in cotton crop allotments. The case was decided in their favor.

member," he writes, "that we had some good times, and that a change needs to come." That summer, a young UI student named Ralph Tyler joined the Illini Alabama initiative. This is his memoir.

In 1966, I was 19 years old and had just finished my freshman year at the University of Illinois. The experience of that summer 46 years ago was too important to my development for me not to retain vivid memories. I remember the satisfaction of being with a group of people who worked together in common purpose on something which mattered; I remember times when I feared for my personal safety; I remember the deep pain and sorrow of a fellow worker's accidental drowning and his tear-filled funeral; and I remember the dust and heat of July and August in rural Alabama.

I knew that student activists from other universities had assisted desegregation efforts in the South, and I decided that was what I was going to do. I believed then and I believe now that you try to find ways you can make a difference. At first I applied directly to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but when I found out about the Illini Alabama Project workers via their table in the Illini Union, I went with them.

Limited resources, rudimentary conditions

More than 80 percent of Greene County's residents then were African-Americans (a term not yet in use), few of whom were registered to vote and none of whom held public office. The level of African-American poverty and deprivation in the county was extreme. As my co-worker, Rick Harper, wrote in *The Daily Illini*, their

Editor's note: The Civil Rights and Voting Rights acts, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1964 and 1965, respectively, were landmark pieces of legislation that declared racial segregation and discrimination unlawful. At the University of Illinois, students responded to the massive social changes of the '60s in various ways, including the formation of the Illini Alabama Project, a registered student organization with 19 inaugural members, whose stated purpose was "to sponsor summer volunteer projects in the area of voter registration, political education and community organization." In a June 4, 1966, Daily Illini story, student writer Rick Harper '66 LAS recalled his hopes, frustrations and constant fear while working on the Illini Alabama Project in Greene County the previous summer and stated his intent to return. "I also re-

“condition is only hinted at by the fact that median annual family income for Negroes is still less than \$1,000” (\$7,110 in today’s dollars).

Segregation was practiced aggressively in Greene County. The minority of white citizens controlled all of the institutions of power and had no interest in sharing power or opportunity with the African-American majority. The condition of the streets in Greene County graphically captured the disparity between the races: In the white sections, the streets were paved; in the African-American parts, virtually all were unpaved and sometimes deeply rutted.

The three University of Illinois students who worked in Greene County were Harper, Bob Felber '67 LAS and I. Our office was a one-room building located at 317 Greensboro Road, Eutaw, Ala., and had a desk, a couple of folding chairs, a pay telephone on the back wall, a hand-cranked mimeograph machine and Bob’s sleeping bag and record player. Bob slept on the office floor, while Rick and I slept in a spare room in a house a short walk away.

Saying that we “worked” in Greene County does not mean that we were paid. Rick had done some fundraising on campus prior to departing for Greene County, and each of us had brought a little money. We used our limited resources to pay for food, office supplies and gas for the much-used Chevrolet which Bob drove to Alabama and which we used to travel throughout the county. After we exhausted our funds, friends in Illinois, including my aunt, Priscilla Tyler, then a professor in the UI Department of English and College of Education, provided additional financial support. Aunt Priscilla always accepted my collect calls. During one such call, she agreed immediately to wire money so we could purchase a whole pig for the approaching Greene County “Roots Day” barbecue, an annual community event.

Our daily work involved going door-to-door, i.e., sharecropper shack to sharecropper shack. I found their living conditions to be very rudimentary, with uninsulated buildings, few belongings, poor clothing and poorer nutrition. While some people certainly were fearful of taking steps that might evict them, others were amazingly brave. Their reception of us was generally positive as we organized sharecroppers, talked to people about registering to vote, accompanied them to registration and spoke to students and their parents about having the courage to integrate the still all-white Greene County High School that fall.

Our communication strategy also involved newsletters and notices, all of which we wrote, produced and distributed, starting early on Sunday mornings at churches around the county. These fliers announced upcoming “mass meetings,” held in the evenings in various churches, where everyone sat in the plain wooden pews, and people, particularly the women, tried to cool themselves with hand fans. The speakers, many of whom were local ministers, would talk about what was going on in the “movement,” plans for future actions, how much remained to be done and the need to get more people involved. In between passing out the leaflets and attending the night-time meetings,

we’d drive to the county’s far south end and cool off by swimming in the warm and murky water of an abandoned gravel pit.

Boycott, jail time and vindication

One Saturday morning in July, Bob, I and Libbie Kirkland, a local African-American teenager who frequently participated in our activities, were on the sidewalks of Eutaw’s shopping district, passing out fliers urging people not to patronize the local stores that refused to hire African-Americans and to shop instead where African-Americans had jobs. This activity upset both merchants and local law enforcement authorities and led to our arrest. As Greene County Sheriff Bill Lee escorted us to a police car, he asked whether we had read Alabama’s anti-boycott law. If we had replied to his question, which we did not, the answer would have been “no.” Lee assured us

Power In Numbers

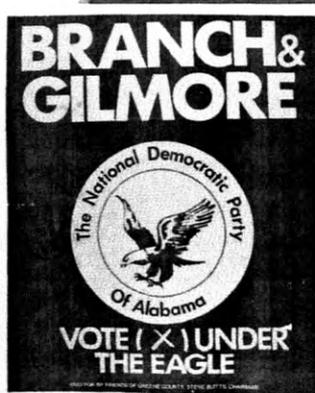
Greene County sees changes as African-Americans register to vote

Did voter registration efforts of civil rights organizations, such as the Illini Alabama Project, make a difference in the 1960s South? Yes, they did – and quickly, too.

Unwilling to uphold the anti-integration stance of the Democratic Party in the South, African-Americans joined the National Democratic Party of Alabama. In the late 1960s and 1970, the all-black NDPA slate of candidates swept elections throughout the state, including Greene County. Among the winners were the Rev. William McKinley Branch, the first African-American probate judge in the area (for whom a courthouse would later be named), and Thomas Gilmore, also a minister, who defeated Bill Lee for sheriff and would hold the position for 13 years. (The 1979 film *He Who Walks Alone*, also known as *Lawman Without a Gun*, starred Lou Gossett Jr. and chronicled Gilmore’s election and vow, in accordance with his nonviolent beliefs, to never carry a gun.)

According to **Ralph Tyler** '69 LAS, a University of Illinois student and member of the Illini Alabama Project, the election results in Greene County – which garnered national notice – show the power of the Voting Rights Act.

“Martin Luther King Jr. and Lyndon Johnson did absolutely the right thing – to fight hard for the right to vote,” he says. “It goes a long way in changing politics.” – **Beatrice Pavia**



Poster in the collection of Jim Nugent

A campaign poster from the late 1960s backs African-American candidates in Greene County.

that he never acted without first becoming fully versed in the relevant law and suggested we would be well-advised to follow his example.

Bob and I were put in separate cells in the jail's relatively upscale "white section," and Libbie was taken to the "colored section." Segregating us by race seemed ironic, given what we were doing in Greene County and the conduct which triggered our arrest, but our jailers didn't seem to appreciate it.

Once we were released from our brief stint in jail, we learned that Sheriff Lee had a point. Alabama law made it a misdemeanor to circulate "any notice of boycott . . . [or] publishing or declaring that a boycott or ban exists or has existed or is contemplated against any person, firm, corporation, or association of persons doing a lawful business." While law school was still several years away, I was able to discern that we had done what the law prohibited.

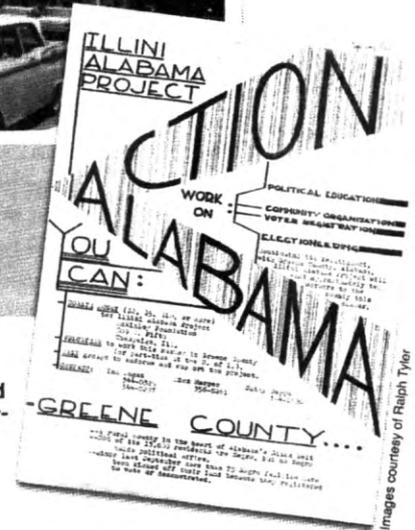
We had the great good fortune to be represented by a fine lawyer, Donald A. Jelinek, who had an office in Selma, Ala., where he did civil rights work, including representing civil rights workers. T.H. Boggs, the local district attorney, dismissed the charges against us after Jelinek commenced a federal lawsuit challenging Alabama's anti-boycott law on First Amendment grounds guaranteeing free speech. When all the legal proceedings were concluded in the case



NEGRO RESIDENTS OF GREENE COUNTY DEMAND:

- 1—Open public facilities
- 2—Equal employment
- 3—A human rights commission
- 4—Negro policemen
- 5—Federal anti-poverty program

An Illini Alabama Project flier, right, urges people to support the cause. Above, the group lists African-Americans' demands, including open public facilities and equal employment. According to UI professor Jim Anderson, who lived in Eutaw, business boycotts in the downtown area, top, proved very effective.



Kirkland v. Wallace 403 F. 2d 413 (5th Cir. 1968), we faced no charges, and the law was declared unconstitutional.

Later that summer we used Jelinek's services for a case to be brought on behalf of African-American farmers in Greene County and elsewhere in Alabama. Filed in federal court in Washington, D.C., against the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the case chal-

'I Paid A Hell Of A Price'

But civil rights attorney Don Jelinek has no regrets about his activist activities



Attorney Don Jelinek, left, and civil rights leader Stokely Carmichael in Selma, Ala.

A 31-year-old Wall Street attorney named Don Jelinek arrived in Mississippi for a short visit in 1965 and ended up staying three years, working with hundreds of clients related to the civil rights cause. Two such cases involved Ralph Tyler of the Illini Alabama Project — one establishing the right to boycott and the other bringing racial equality to boards that determined cotton crop allotments.

What role did the legal system play in the civil rights movement? Believe it or not, mostly bail. You can only stay in jail so long before you lose heart. Once we started getting people out of jail and getting charges dropped, then the movement got stronger. The [African-American] farmers, they were helpless.

They worked the land, they could be thrown out for any reason, they were cheated. During the season, they had no cash, and so they would take out loans from the guy who operated the country store, who also was the plantation owner. So somehow or other, by the end of the season, they either came out even, or they were still in debt. So it was really [a form of] slavery returned to them.

We helped them eliminate racial barriers on the cotton crop allotment boards. For the first time these farmers were getting [paid] cash. We started creating farm cooperatives, so they didn't have to buy from the country store.

We were earning nothing, just barely getting by. And then somehow you're back in the North, and someone says, "I've got a good office job for you," and it doesn't sound [so] good. Instead, [you're] looking for a nonprofit that barely pays. Everybody says, "I paid a hell of a price for doing it," ... [but they all say], "I am so lucky I had this experience, the experience of a lifetime. I'll never be the same, and I'll never regret it." — As told to Beatrice Pavia

lenged the system of elections used to select members for the local bodies that determined cotton crop allotments. The election system was rigged to prevent participation by African-Americans, which, of course, meant that they fared poorly in the allotments they received.

I drove a borrowed VW van to transport African-American farmers from Greene County to D.C. for the preliminary injunction hearing in the case. We drove through the night, both there and back. After stopping to eat in Virginia, my friends told me that was their first experience of dining in a restaurant with white people. While in Washington, we stayed in the Georgetown home of two prominent lawyers, Jean and Edgar Cahn.

Our trip to Washington was a success. The court issued a preliminary injunction, ordering that the elections in Alabama be postponed. That allowed for more time to encourage candidates to run, increasing the likelihood of a fairer and more racially inclusive process.

Legacy of the Illini Alabama Project

Every summer vacation comes to an end. When we left Greene County, Rick went to graduate school at the University of Chicago, and Bob and I returned to Champaign. I moved into a room in Townsend Hall for my sophomore year.

What, then, is the legacy of the Illini Alabama Project? As far as I know, it did not last beyond 1966, and that was as it should be. The role of white people in the civil rights movement was somewhat fraught from the outset, and by 1966 that issue had become a divisive distraction. There was also the undeniable fact that racial separation and discrimination were (and are) national, not regional, afflictions, thus making the idea of "going to the South," rather than to, say, Chicago, Cleveland or Detroit, an anachronism at best.

While the legal framework of segregation has been dismantled, barriers and disparities between the races remain enormous. None of this diminishes the fact that the Illini Alabama Project had its place and served a worthy purpose. I have no doubt that all those who participated in and supported the project in 1965 and 1966 did some good and that each learned from the experience. One cannot ask more from a college activity.

I hope that students currently on the three campuses of the University of Illinois are finding worthwhile ways to become engaged, to learn and to test their evolving beliefs against the reality of the world. One of the great luxuries of going to college is that it is a time set aside to prepare for the lifetime to follow, one which I hope includes fulfilling work to make the world a more peaceful and more equitable place. ❖

Tyler '69 LAS, a partner in the law firm of Venable LLP, works in the firm's offices in Baltimore and Washington, D.C. He is the former deputy attorney general of Maryland, Baltimore city solicitor and chief counsel of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.



UI News Bureau/L. Brian Stauffer Photo

'In Harm's Way'

James D. Anderson looks back on the civil rights movement in his native Alabama

James D. Anderson, EDM '69, PHD '73 ED, an expert on public school desegregation, holds a singular perspective on the civil rights movement. A professor of history and educational policy studies at the University of Illinois, he is also a native of Eutaw, Ala., which he left in 1966 to begin graduate studies at Illinois.

Describe Eutaw, Ala., in the mid-'60s.

By 1965 or '66, the civil rights movement had taken hold in that town and in that county. The young [local] people were out, they were in the streets, they were boycotting, they were helping people to register to vote. The sudden and very radical changes – it was like a shock wave for the old establishment [both black and white]; it was much more of a grass-roots campaign. The core of the activities was coming from within, so the [civil rights workers from outside of the area] joined the movement that was already under way.

The mid-1960s was "a very difficult time to be in Eutaw," says Jim Anderson, a UI professor who grew up in the Alabama town.

How were these outside workers viewed?

They were like Martians to us [at first]. They were incredibly brave. We often wondered, "Who are these people who ... deliberately put themselves in harm's way?" [We] felt very close to them. No one should ever underestimate the danger [that existed].

How did the community respond to outside assistance?

It was a huge motivation to start to realize that change was coming to this region.

What was the impact of the Voting Rights Act?

The effect was enormous. ... You can see the shift from more than 100 years or so of supremacist governments being changed. ... Jim Crow [laws touched] every aspect of your life, from being able to take swim lessons to going to the library. The voter registration act changed all that immediately [because elected African-American officials could address these issues].

What's Greene County like today?

It's still very poor – but the oppression is gone.

– Beatrice Pavia